

# Simcoe panel important to town's history

**Kris Dube**  
The Local  
Local Journalism  
Initiative Reporter

A commemorative panel at an important site in Niagara-on-the-Lake's history may have some inaccuracies — but that shouldn't take away from its significance, according to local historians.

In August, the town's municipal heritage committee received a report in relation to demolition plans for the former Parliament Oak school, which closed in 2015 and was sold to a developer three years later.

Two Sisters Resorts has plans for a 129-suite hotel with a restaurant and other amenities.

And to the surprise of locals, researchers from Stantec, the firm hired by the developer to create a commemoration plan for the site and its artifacts, say the familiar stone panel on an outside wall of the school, marking the property as where one of the first sessions of Upper Canada parliament occurred, could be wrong.

History experts within the local community aren't disputing the position brought forward by the developer's team.

Nothing really confirms it to be true — or false, says Sarah Kaufman, curator at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Museum.

She said there's an understanding that the government assembled under an oak tree, but it's never been certain that it's the one on the former school property.

"It's just not stated that it occurred exactly at that site," Kaufman told *The Local*, adding that the meeting of parliament has never been proven through archival documentation.

It's possible the property in the Old Town was just used as a spot to highlight this "local lore" in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

"I think it was chosen as the site to commemorate that history, but is not necessarily the actual site where it happened," she said.

Kaufman also said the town reached out to the museum recently as a result of the claims in the developer's commemoration plan, which points to the potential mistakes on the stone panel.

Is this the first time the history of the site has been publicly questioned?

Kaufman said it's possible it's been discussed in the past, but she doesn't recall it coming up in her 13 years with the museum.

The commemoration plan included in the heritage committee meeting agenda says that on Sept. 17, 1792, Simcoe held the first session of parliament for the new colony of Upper Canada, and that the "exact location" of the first session of parliament is unknown.

Possible locations include Navy Hall, Butler's Barracks,

the Freemasons' Hall, or a tent located under an oak tree at the present-day location of 325 King Street, the site of the school.

"However, it is generally acknowledged that Navy Hall served as the main parliament site of Upper Canada during this time," says the report.

The second session of the parliament of Upper Canada was held between May 31, 1793, and July 9, 1794, says the report before the committee.

Interpretive material on the concrete panel on the wall of the former school suggests that Simcoe presided upon a session of this parliament in August 1793, at the former school site under the shade of an oak tree.

"However, both the House of Assembly and Legislative Council were prorogued on July 9, 1793, and no further sessions of parliament were held until 1794," said the report prepared by Stantec Consulting.

Also, the diary of Elizabeth Simcoe indicates that she and her husband set sail for Toronto on July 29, 1793, and remained in the Toronto area through September.

"Therefore, it is unlikely that any parliamentary proceeding took place under an oak tree at present-day 325 King Street in August 1793," the report says.

Because of these findings, the developer wasn't planning to use the panel as part of its commemoration on the school site.

But town staff are recommending an amendment to the developer's plans — that this panel is retained and placed on King Street.

Council has yet to approve the project.

Despite an inability for anyone to confirm whether what the panel says is an error, Kaufman said it should be included in the developer's plans.

"I think it would be good community outreach if the property owners maintained the plaque on the site," said Kaufman.

It's also possible that a plaque will be placed nearby to clarify that the panel may have incorrect information.

Kaufman supported the idea and noted that the Ontario Heritage Trust is in the process of updating other plaques in the province to "provide more context" about other events.

Ron Dale, a local historian and author, is also familiar with the confusion.

"The idea of parliament meeting under an oak tree on this property is part of the oral history of Niagara-on-the-Lake going back to the late 19th century, and well-established in local lore, whether true or not," he told *The Local*, adding that the panel also incorrectly refers to Simcoe as a "sir."

But he believes the story of the meeting at this site must have had some basis in fact.

"The legend may have had

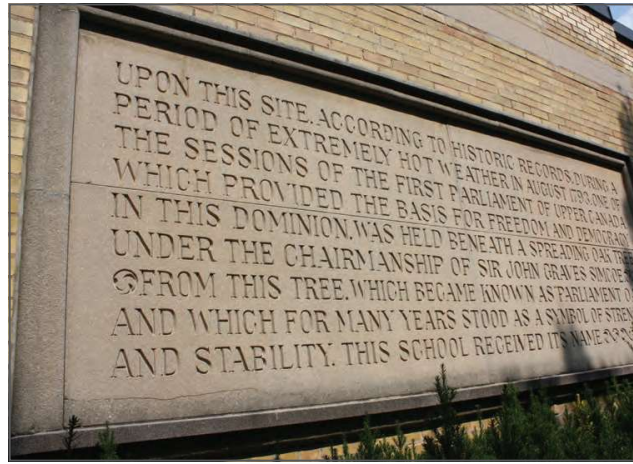
the wrong timing of the meeting and perhaps the wrong location, but the event is part of the fabric of the community and may have inspired generations of students who attended the school," said Dale, who was superintendent of Niagara national historic sites for Parks Canada from 1992 to 2013.

He said it's possible that on a particularly hot day, the government might have met outdoors near Navy Hall where the Simcoes had large marquis tents erected.

He also suspects that Senator Plumb, who had a "magnificent house" on the Parliament Oak site, may have "spread the story to give more prominence to his property."

Dale said the panels, historically accurate or not, "have taken on their own value as important community artifacts and should be preserved."

Kaufman said the Plumb house is an important piece



Correct or not, the panel on the wall of the former Parliament Oak School is important to the history of NOTL, expert says. (Kris Dube)

of the property, and that there could be remnants of that structure buried beneath the former school.

Bas-relief panels, the Parliament Oak School sign, bricks from the former school, and a sculpture related to the Un-

derground Railroad, are other components the developer has said will be incorporated into the plans.

## Town staff reports cost of an off-site meeting to be \$5,000

Continued from page 12

guments and points that have already been raised.

She also said it's "hard to control a crowd when they're that big," referring to hundreds of people piling into the community centre.

Coun. Adriana Vizari asked if the \$5,000 price tag would also apply to venues in other villages when projects come up related to places like Glendale or St. Davids.

Cluckie said using another facility in one of those places

would likely come at a similar cost.

"It would have to be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, depending where we go," she said.

Late last year, the province enacted its More Homes Built Faster Act, which is part of Ontario's Housing Supply Action Plan and aims to see 1.5 million new homes built in Ontario by 2031.

That, along with the town and Niagara Region's official plans, which are guided by provincial legislation, all need

to be taken into consideration, said Coun. Erwin Wiens, who believes educating the public about the planning process and how it works should be a priority.

He said there are examples of public meetings in other municipalities being relocated to larger sites, and that Niagara-on-the-Lake should be cautious.

"It's generally a negative outcome," he said. Wiens also said it's a common occurrence when major developments are being scrutinized by the public

that "emotions get in the way of the factual basis of good planning."

Coun. Wendy Cheropita said the main concern is that residents want to "feel as though they're being heard."

She hopes the town can "look at ways in which we might be able to find some efficiencies," and also assure the public that written submissions and comments are not ignored by council and staff.

No decision was made Tuesday, with the report received for information.

## SUPERIOR COUNTERTOPS

### QUARTZ | GRANITE

FREE STAINLESS STEEL SINK  
WITH QUARTZ OR GRANITE COUNTERTOPS



HOURS: Monday to Friday 9 am - 5 pm Saturday 10 am - 1 pm

580 Read Rd., Units D & E, St. Catharines | 905-687-4949 | SUPERIORCOUNTERS.CA